

A *Parent's* Guide To the New *Elementary School* *Proficiency Assessment*



Each Spring all fourth grade public school students in New Jersey take a new series of tests known as the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) to measure their abilities in language arts literacy, math and science.

This document is intended to serve as a guide to parents to explain the purpose of the ESPA, interpret the results of the assessment and offer suggestions on how to help your child achieve academic success.

The importance of parents to their children's performance in school can not be overstated:
Parents are their children's first and most important teachers.

Your interest and involvement in the education of your children can be the key to their success in school and in life.

What every parent should know about changes in New Jersey's curriculum and assessment standards

Raising educational standards is essential for students to lead successful, productive lives as adults. New Jersey has approved a more rigorous set of core curriculum content standards so your children will have the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenges that await them in the 21st century. New Jersey has also developed a new statewide assessment program to find out how students are meeting the new higher standards.

Tests have changed to accommodate the times. Traditional classroom tests in subjects such as math, science, reading and writing are drawn from your child's actual schoolwork. They are much the same as the tests today's adults took as children. The results of these tests and other factors, such as the teacher's evaluation of conduct and performance in the classroom, are components of your child's report card. In addition, some schools use standardized achievement tests such as the CAT (California Achievement Test) at different grade levels to measure student progress against state and national averages.

Classroom and standardized achievement tests are different than the new **Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA)** given to fourth and fifth graders and the **Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA)** given to eighth graders. The **ESPA** and **GEPA** measure how well your child is meeting the new higher standards of education. But the **ESPA** and **GEPA** scores are not reflected on your child's report card, nor do they influence your child's promotion to the next grade level.

This new assessment program provides more accurate information to show schools, teachers and parents how well their children are measuring up to the new standards. It is a diagnostic tool that will allow the state and local school districts to have an immediate and powerful impact on the quality of education offered to all public school students.

*This Parent's Guide was prepared by the
New Jersey Department of Education,
Office of External Affairs.*

Christine Todd Whitman
Governor



David Hespe
Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Education



How to read your child's test results

The ESPA language arts literacy, mathematics and science scores are reported as scale scores with a range of 100 to 300. Scores at or above 250 indicate "Advanced Proficient." Scores from 200 to 249 indicate "Proficient." If your child is in the "Advanced Proficient" or "Proficient" level, he/she has met the state standards for that content area. Scores below 200 indicate your child performed at the "Partially Proficient" level and has not met the state's minimum level of proficiency, based on this test administration, and may need some type of additional instructional support.

Your child's report is available only to parents, guardians, and authorized school officials. If you have any questions about the report, you should contact your child's teacher or principal. He or she can help you interpret the information on the score report and explain what the instructional staff is doing and what you can do to help your child master the skills measured on the test. Special programs and related services will be provided for the child after the parent and school staff determine his/her needs.

Three content areas were assessed on the 1999 ESPA: language arts literacy, mathematics, and science.

Your child's scale score on each content area. Scale scores range from a low of 100 to a high of 300.

Based on your child's test scores, his or her performance is characterized as "Partially Proficient", "Proficient", or "Advanced Proficient."

Indicates if your child was identified as a student with limited English proficiency (LEP); a special education student (SE); exempt from testing based on an individual education plan (IEP); or receiving Title I services (Title I).

Test Date: May 1999


County:
District:
School:

Student Name:

Date of Birth:
Gender:

LEP:
SE:
IEP Exempt:
Title I:

Test ID No:
Linkage Label No:



**New Jersey Statewide Assessment System
Elementary School Proficiency Assessment
Individual Student Report**

Content Area	Your Score	Proficiency Level
Language Arts Literacy	222	Proficient
Mathematics	213	Proficient
Science	239	Proficient

Partially Proficient: Score BELOW 200
Proficient: Score AT OR ABOVE 200 but BELOW 250
Advanced Proficient: Score AT OR ABOVE 250

Language Arts Literacy			Mathematics			Science		
Cluster	Your Score	Just Proficient Mean	Cluster	Your Score	Just Proficient Mean	Cluster	Your Score	Just Proficient Mean
Writing (24) ¹	12.0 out of 24	9.9 ✓	Number Sense, Operations, & Properties (11) ¹	7.5 out of 11	5.9 ✓	Life Science (12) ¹	8.0 out of 12	6.7 ✓
Reading (26) ¹	16.0 out of 26	14.1 ✓	Measurement (7) ¹	3.0 out of 7	2.9 ✓	Physical Science (15) ¹	13.0 out of 15	9.4 ✓
			Spatial Sense & Geometry (9) ¹	6.0 out of 9	4.9 ✓	Earth Science (16) ¹	11.5 out of 16	8.0 ✓
Working with Text (13) ¹	8.5 out of 13	7.0 ✓	Data Analysis, Probability, & Discrete Mathematics (8) ¹	4.0 out of 8	3.9 ✓	Cognitive Skills (18) ¹	12.0 out of 18	10.1 ✓
Analyzing Text (13) ¹	7.5 out of 13	7.1 ✓	Patterns & Algebra (8) ¹	5.5 out of 8	5.3 ✓	Process Skills (25) ¹	20.5 out of 25	13.9 ✓
			Knowledge (9) ¹	5.5 out of 9	5.9 ✓			
			Problem Solving Skills (34) ¹	20.5 out of 34	17.1 ✓			

¹ The number in parentheses is the total number of points possible.

Defines "Partially Proficient", "Proficient", or "Advanced Proficient."

The ESPA language arts literacy components contain two content clusters* (above the dotted line) and two skill clusters* (below the dotted line).

The ESPA science components contain three content clusters* (above the dotted line) and two skills clusters* (below the dotted line).

Indicates the number of points your child earned out of the total number of points possible for the cluster. For example, this student earned 16 of the possible 26 points in Reading.

The "Just Proficient Mean" is the average number of points earned by students who were just proficient (i.e., scored 200) in this content area.

A ✓ indicates that your child scored higher on this cluster* than the average for students who were "just proficient" in this area.

The ESPA mathematics components contain five content clusters* (above the dotted line) and two skills clusters* (below the dotted line).

*A cluster is a group of items that measure similar skills. The skills in a given cluster are typically taught together to allow students to make appropriate connections.

To help you better understand the benefits of the ESPA and your child's score, the New Jersey Department of Education is providing the answers to the most frequently asked questions. See next two pages.

Frequently asked

Why is there a need for higher standards and a new test?

The world is very different than the one today's parents knew as children. There are stunning breakthroughs in medicine, science, technology, commerce and culture on an almost daily basis. Prior to 1975, academic success was based on how well students performed in relation to their classmates. Today, students compete on a global basis. Our ever-changing economy demands new types of workers with new types of advanced skills. To prepare students for the challenges that await them in college and the workplace, New Jersey has developed new, more rigorous standards in several key curriculum areas. Teachers, principals and parents, as well as representatives of the business community and the New Jersey Legislature, participated in the formulation of the new standards, which were approved by the State Board of Education. More than 1,000 people contributed to the process. Regional meetings and focus groups were held. An informational video was produced by the Department of Education and made available to the public. The new standards were published in the newspapers and sent to every district for review. This was one of the most ambitious and comprehensive public outreach efforts ever conducted by the Department. The **Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA)** was designed to enable schools, teachers and parents to know how well young children are measuring up to these higher standards.

What is this new "assessment"?

The **ESPA** measures what students know and can do in language arts literacy (reading and writing), math and science, three of the content areas covered by the state's higher core curriculum content standards. In the future, four more subjects are scheduled to be added. They are social studies, visual and performing arts, health and physical education, and world languages. You can learn more about these areas of expertise by logging onto the New Jersey Department of Education's website at <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/index.html>. The Department of Education involved the public and education practitioners in the development of the new assessment from the very beginning of the process. Using the best national model available, education experts formulated and then validated the test. Practitioners, including New Jersey public school teachers, determined how the test should be scored.

What should parents and students expect of the new test?

The **ESPA** is a new experience for students and teachers. It replaces the state-approved, commercially available standardized tests fourth graders took in the past. The results of the initial test administrations were characteristic of those traditionally seen whenever a decision is made to implement and assess higher standards. What parents must remember is New Jersey students did not suddenly become less proficient; they were just measured for the first time against higher standards so a new benchmark could be set. As schools and teachers adjust the curriculum to concentrate on areas of weakness, scores will improve.

Will these results be used to decide which students should be promoted to the next grade level?

No. The **ESPA** is not a promotion test. Students do not have to "pass" the **ESPA** to proceed to the next grade. It is a diagnostic tool to help teachers and parents guide students to higher levels of achievement.

How is the ESPA different from other tests?

It is different in three ways. First, the test questions are tied directly to the new content that students are expected to know by the fourth grade. Second, test results are based on the progress your child is making toward meeting the new curriculum standards. They are not based on how well your child is doing compared to other children. Third, the information learned from the test can help teachers and schools provide your child with a better educational program tailored to meet his or her specific needs. The **ESPA** expects more of students than traditional tests. Students are asked to solve problems, think critically and write about what they are thinking.

How is the test scored?

The **ESPA** contains both multiple-choice questions that are machine-scored and open-ended items, such as essays, which are scored by trained raters. The maximum point score is 300. Student performance is reported by level: partially proficient (199 and below), proficient (200 to 249) and advanced proficient (250 and above). A nationally renowned panel of education experts governed the process used to establish cutoff scores, which were set by teachers.

Will my child's test results be made public?

No individual student's test results will be made public. Only you, your child and your child's teacher will ever know the results. However, average results for your child's school and district will be made public as part of the New Jersey School Report Card.

Why is the statewide proficiency average for language arts literacy so low?

It is important to remember that New Jersey students are traditionally high achievers. The SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) results confirm this. Our students and teachers have not changed. Our expectations have changed. The language arts literacy results for the **ESPA** are understandable because we are expecting students to read, understand and expand upon longer, more complex reading material. We also expect students to clearly communicate in writing through extended essays, a skill valued by colleges, universities and future employers.

Questions and Answers

Why do some children have trouble with the math segment?

The knowledge and skills expected of students in this subject centers on problem-solving and demonstrating that they can use math in a practical way. This is a strong move away from simple computation. Fourth graders are expected to possess the scientific building blocks needed for future learning.

Why categorize students who are not measuring up to the new standards “partially proficient” instead of non-proficient?

The terms partially proficient, proficient and advanced proficient are specified in federal law and nationally accepted. They are based on the premise that no student is completely lacking in the wide range of knowledge and skills contained in curriculum standards. The term “partial” recognizes the fact that all students have some degree of proficiency in the subject areas we assess and they can build on this knowledge base to achieve higher levels in the future.

Will any special programs or services be available to help children if their test results are low?

Your school district is responsible for assuring that every child receives a thorough and efficient education, as defined by state law and regulation. If your child's grade is partially proficient, your school will take steps to help your son or daughter meet the standards. The New Jersey Department of Education is prepared to help your school in its efforts to assure that every child is challenged and makes real progress in the future.

Will test questions be released to the public?

Concerns about test security do not permit the state, at this time, to release all test items. However, the Department of Education has placed a practice test on its web site. Fifty percent of this practice test consists of actual operational items. Others appeared on various field test. In November 2000, the department sent to local school districts one of the two language arts literacy open-ended items that appeared on the 2000 ESPA so teachers could see the responses for each of their students. We are continuing to work with our testing contractor to release selected items from the ESPA mathematics and science test.

How long is the test?

The typical testing day is confined to the morning. The longest period of testing time without a break is 45 minutes. On any given day, total student testing time, excluding directions and breaks, is no more than two hours. The ESPA is important to know how well your child is adjusting to New Jersey's curriculum standards.

Will any changes be made to the test?

Several changes have already been made. First, we have substantially reduced testing time. The language arts (reading and writing) component has been shortened by 60 minutes for fourth graders. Second, the ESPA will be spread over two grades in the future. The first operational ESPA social studies test will be administered to fifth graders beginning October 2001. Third, the best way to assess student performance in the three remaining core curriculum content areas – visual and performing arts, world languages, and health and physical education – is being reviewed by an advisory panel established by Commissioner Hespe. Tests in these areas have been put on hold until the panel's recommendations are finalized and reviewed by the Department of Education. Fourth, in October 2000, the Commissioner accepted the recommendation of a panel of 4th grade teachers and curriculum supervisors that the ESPA language arts literacy scores for 1999 and 2000 be recalculated to more accurately reflect the expectations of the teachers who designed the test. As a result, a number of “borderline” students moved from the partially proficient into the proficient category. The recalculation was the first step in an overall review of the language arts literacy portion of the ESPA by the department's assessment committee.

Is the ESPA an appropriate test for young children?

All questions are carefully reviewed by trained professionals to ensure fairness. They also undergo a statistical analysis to guard against any racial, ethnic or gender bias. Teachers, child study team members and administrators knowledgeable about children with special needs also are involved in the development of the ESPA.

When will the results of the ESPA be available?

The ESPA results are reported in June.

How can I get more information about the ESPA?

Information about the ESPA is available from:

The New Jersey Department of Education

Office of Assessment

PO Box 500

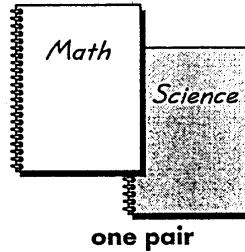
Trenton, New Jersey, 08625-0500

Phone: 609-984-0107

Math

- George has 4 notebooks: one for math, one for science, one for language arts, and one for social studies. He is going to take two notebooks home tonight.

Example:



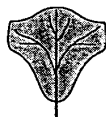
How many different pairs of notebooks could he take home?

- (A) 2
- (B) 4
- ★ (C) 6
- (D) 8

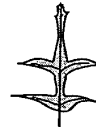
Science



- The picture above shows a leaf that Sam found. Which one of the following leaves came from the same kind of tree? Explain your answer. Give at least two reasons in your answer.



A



C



B



★ D

Correct answers are denoted with a ★.

How parents can help their children achieve high standards

Expect success at school

Children work best when they know what you expect of them. Discuss your expectations for good grades, attendance and study habits with your children. When there is a choice, encourage them to take courses that will challenge and interest them, but not overwhelm them.

View unsatisfactory grades as an opportunity

All parents want their children to receive good marks and advance to the next grade, but don't expect a teacher to give your children a grade or an honor that they do not deserve. Make it clear to your children that grades are not "given" – they are earned. If your child receives an unsatisfactory report card or test score, use this as an opportunity to restate your commitment to high standards and explain why they are important to his or her future. Discuss with your child (and the teacher) what he or she will need to do differently to improve.

Attend school functions and know your child's school family

The teacher is the primary player in your child's school environment, but there are others who make a very valuable contribution. Attending parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights and other events are the best ways to become acquainted with them. If you cannot attend, send a note to your child's teacher stating that you welcome any messages or phone calls concerning your child's progress.

Communicate regularly and openly with your child's teacher and school staff

Keep track of your child's progress by asking the teacher what skills and subject matter your son or daughter will be learning over the course of the school year. Be prepared to let the teacher or other school staff know about your child's study habits, special interests and any health problems that may affect his or her learning. Make a list of questions before you speak with your child's teacher. The teacher will welcome this as a sign that you take your child's schooling very seriously. Some basic questions to ask a teacher or school staff are:

- How is my child doing in your class?
- Is he/she having any problems? What are the problems and how can the family help at home?
- How well does my child work independently and with others?
- How does my child seem to feel about school or his or her own abilities?

Listen carefully to the reports and statements from your child's teacher, counselor or school staff. This information will give you additional ideas for questions to ask.

Help your child keep pace

If your child needs help to improve his or her academic performance, ask a teacher if the school district offers after-school tutoring, summer programs or other activities that can be of assistance. Mentoring services are provided by many state, county and municipal agencies, private and non-profit organizations, corporations and school systems. A mentor is a trained, caring adult who is matched with one or more children and provides consistent attention and encouragement to help youngsters reach their full potential. Information about mentoring services in your area can be obtained from the Division of Family Development at the New Jersey Department of Human Services, 6 Quakerbridge Plaza, P. O. Box 716, Trenton, NJ 08625, 609-588-2401. Students can also find research and homework assistance on the Internet. A search for "homework help" will produce a number of useful web sites.

Know your school's discipline code

Read and discuss school rules with your children. Disruptive behavior in class prevents real learning from taking place. Make your expectations for your child's school conduct clear and support the conduct standards of the school.

Work with other parents at school

Just a little of your time can go a long way in helping your child succeed. Your involvement in school activities will show your child that you value a quality education. You can get involved by:

- Attending school board meetings and letting board members know you support high standards of student achievement
- Serving on school-based decision-making teams
- Joining your local Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or another parents' group.
- Attend a NJ GAINS or FANS workshop if one is offered at your school. FANS (Families Achieving the New Standards) offers workshops for parents that focus on the new math, science and technology standards. NJ GAINS (Gaining Achievement In the New Standards) offers workshops focusing on world languages and language arts literacy.

Make sure homework gets done

Be sure to ask your children if they have homework. Parents should reinforce the importance of homework as the main way for a teacher to know whether a student understands what is being taught in the classroom. Help your children with homework but don't do it for them. Here are some helpful hints:

- Schedule daily homework times.
- Find a quiet spot in the home for your children to work.
- Turn off the television or music to make it quiet.
- Pick a location that is close enough for them to ask you or another family member questions about their assignment.
- Ask to see the finished homework.
- If your child often seems confused or unsure about homework assignments, contact the teacher yourself to discuss the matter.

Monitor the time your child spends on extracurricular activities

For many children, participating in sports, music/dance lessons or social clubs such as scouting is an important developmental activity. But too many extracurricular activities can cut into study time and cause stress that can interfere with your child's success in school. Here are some tips you can use to strike a healthy balance:

- Before your child takes on an extra activity, remind him or her that schoolwork takes top priority.
- Make sure your child understands that if grades begin to decline, he or she will be expected to cut back on activities.
- If possible, limit activities to weekends.
- If you strongly suspect that activities are interfering with studies, ask your child's teacher.
- Don't wait until the end of a grading period to find out.

Keep a watchful eye on your child's study habits at home

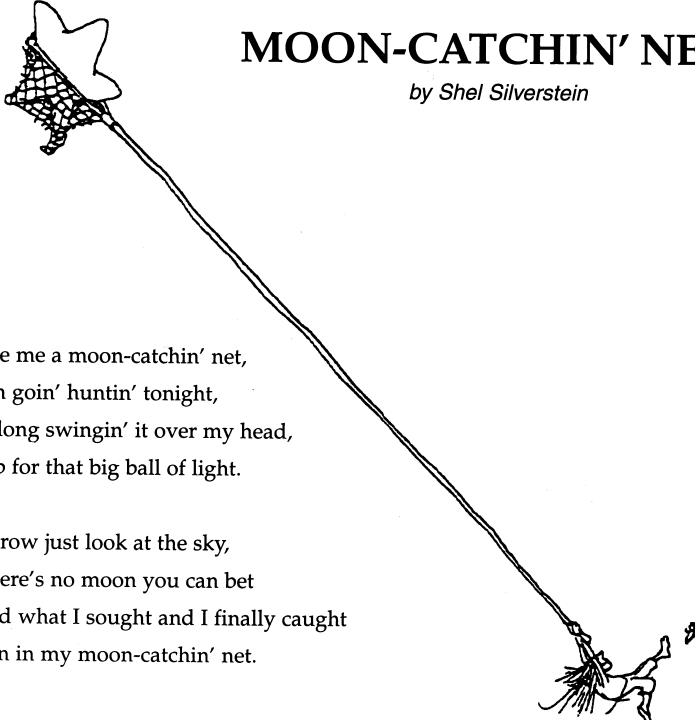
- Encourage reading in your home on a regular basis.
- Place limits on non-educational television.
- Establish clear discipline at home.
- Make school breaks and vacations family learning times.
- Expect achievement and offer praise.

Stay involved in your child's education.

Questions

Language Arts Literacy

Directions: Today you will do a writing assignment. The poem below, "Moon-Catchin' Net," may give you ideas for your writing. Read the poem to yourself while it is read to you.




MOON-CATCHIN' NET

by Shel Silverstein

I've made me a moon-catchin' net,
And I am goin' huntin' tonight,
I'll run along swingin' it over my head,
And grab for that big ball of light.

So tomorrow just look at the sky,
And if there's no moon you can bet
I've found what I sought and I finally caught
The moon in my moon-catchin' net.

But if the moon's still shinin' there,
Look close underneath and you'll get
A clear look at me in the sky swingin' free
With a star in my moon-catchin' net.



Writing Task

Has there ever been something you wanted very much that you may or may not have been able to get? Write about what you wanted. Include the following:

- What did you want to have?
- Why did you want this?
- If you got it, explain how it happened.
- Explain why you were successful in getting it.
- If you didn't get it, explain why not.
- Explain how you might be successful in getting it in the future.

You may take notes, create a web, or do other prewriting work in the planning space. Then, write your description on the lines provided.

Here is a checklist for you to follow to help you do your best writing. Before you begin writing, read the checklist silently as it is read to you. Reread it as often as you need. After you write your description, read what you have written. Use the checklist to make certain that your writing is the best it can be.

Writer's Checklist

Did you remember to

- ☐ keep the central idea or topic in mind?
- ☐ keep your audience in mind?
- ☐ support your ideas with details, explanations, and examples?
- ☐ state your ideas in a clear sequence?
- ☐ include an opening and a closing?
- ☐ use a variety of words and vary your sentence structure?
- ☐ state your opinion or conclusion clearly?
- ☐ capitalize, spell, and use punctuation correctly?
- ☐ write neatly?